Misinformation Through the Internet

Vedder, A.H.

Published in:
Ethics and the Internet

Publication date:
2001

MISINFORMATION THROUGH THE INTERNET: EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

8 *Anton Vedder*

- Misinformation through the Internet: Epistemology and Ethics. In: Anton Vedder (ed.), ***Ethics and the Internet.*** **Antwerpen, Groningen, Oxford: Intersentia, 2001, p. 125-132.**

Abstract

Because information on the Internet can be used as a basis for decisions, actions, and policies, the quality of the information on the Internet is a morally significant issue. In judging the reliability of information from traditional sources, people generally apply secondary epistemic criteria. These concern the perceived reliability of the sources of the information rather than the information itself. Application of these criteria is ultimately based on institutionally embedded systems that confer authority and credibility on organizations and persons. Often, the secondary criteria cannot easily be applied to information on the Internet. In this chapter, I explain why this is so, and I argue that this situation is serious enough to call for special ethical reflection. I suggest that there are two strategies for coming to terms with this problem. The first is to develop a critical attitude in the persons who use the Internet and to show them ways of critically assessing the quality of the information on the Internet. The second consists in a quest for new secondary criteria or for new ways of applying traditional secondary criteria. Implementing both of these strategies may, however, conflict with normative principles regarding the freedom to provide and to receive information, with privacy norms and with normative moral relativism.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the Internet has become one of the most consulted sources of information. An essential characteristic of the Internet is its many-to-many character. People who seek information can access the medium without much difficulty. For people who provide information, it is almost equally easy to distribute information. Because of both the ease with which the information is accessible and the ease with which information can be dispersed, it is also relatively easy to be misled and to mislead, intentionally or unintentionally. Misleading may occur in at least two ways. It may occur through the spread of incorrect or false information. It may also occur in the form of manipulated presentations of, in other respects, correct information. The latter is the case when the correct information is made to appear as stemming from suspicious sources or when it is presented in a different context in which it obtains a completely different meaning than its original one. Conversely, the seeker of information can relatively easily be misled, misinformed, or be tempted to

misinterpret information that, in other respects, is correct. Because information is the basis of decisions, actions, and policy, the phenomenon of misinformation through the Internet calls for critical ethical assessment.

It should be noted that throughout this contribution I use the term Ainformation@ to refer to information that is provided with the intention of distributing it publicly, and on the basis of which decisions for actions and policies can be made. I do not include information in the form of, for instance, pieces of music, footage, et cetera. These are primarily intended as artistic expressions or as entertainment. Nor do I concentrate on information in e-mail communications or information underlying e-commerce transactions.

Perhaps I should also warn the reader beforehand that it is not my intention to depict the problems of misinformation as completely new ones. I am fully aware that certain problems similar to the ones that I will touch upon here have existed in one form or another already from the very first origins of (mass) media onward. As will become clear in the course of my argument, it is my opinion that these problems now in relation to the Internet are starting to occur on a much larger scale than ever before. Of course, many of the debates on ethical issues relating to new (information) technology sooner or later seem to fizzle out with the question whether these are *really* new ones. There is, however, no moral law telling us not to try to spend critically ethical reflection on problems that are not completely new. Such aloofness would even be a bit dramatic if, as seems to be the case with the problems at issue here, the ethical reflection was absent until now, although the problems, in one form or another, already existed for some time.

2. Moral evaluation

From a moral point of view, the situation as described gives rise to four clusters of questions. First, how should this situation be evaluated in moral terms from a general point of view? Is it at all bad that information on the Internet is not always reliable? In what way is information on the Internet different from the information from other sources? Do these differences justify special attention from a moral point of view? Second, what can or should be done eventually in order to warrant the reliability of information on the Internet? In what way could answers to this question amount to collective actions aimed at warranting or enhancing the reliability of information on the Internet? Is it not, for instance, the responsibility of the users of the information to check its reliability? Third, supposing that something should be done to enhance the reliability of information on the Internet, how should possible conflicts of these reliability-enhancing measures with other normative principles be treated? Fourth, again supposing that something should be done, who or what institution can be considered to be responsible for guaranteeing the reliability of information on the net?

These questions are not only important from an ethical perspective; for lawyers they are equally important. The ever-returning legal question

concerning confidence in electronic information-provision processes, broadly taken, has to do with responsibility and liability for incorrect, incomplete, and illegitimate information. Furthermore, existing law entails all kinds of starting points but also possible restrictions on solutions to the questions relating to reliability. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will delimit myself to the purely ethical questions.

3. Significance

Why are questions of reliability of information on the Internet morally significant? Misinformation through the Internet may have a trivial impact in certain cases. In others, however, its consequences can be serious. Individuals may sometimes take wrong decisions with important consequences for their own lives. A person may, for example, be misled by pseudoscientific information on certain quasi-medical sites, and decide not to have scientifically acknowledged medical therapy for a serious disease. Or he may come to be persuaded by pseudoscientific information and underestimate risks that are normally attached to certain kinds of behavior. Less dramatically, he may use incorrect information on the Internet for purposes of education, and in this way obstruct his own quest for truth. Of course, misinformation through the Internet may also have serious consequences for others than the direct recipient. The spread of lies conflicts with the quest for truth that is often held to be profitable for societies as a whole. Also, the Internet can be used to fuel existing prejudices against people or to introduce new ones.

These are only some examples to illustrate in what ways the distribution of incorrect information and the manipulation of information on the Internet may have morally significant consequences. Already now, one may be tempted to ask: what is so special about misinformation through the Internet? Is providing wrong information through the Internet in any way different from deception through traditional media, such as newspapers, television, or radio? The Internet is different in at least two respects.

First, the scale on which people (so-called Acontent providers@) can now spread information through the Internet is much larger than is the case with the traditional media. The relatively easy manner in which information can be divulged through the Internet, gives urgency to questions regarding the reliability of information on the Internet.

Second, the Internet is different because of the absence, or at least the troubled applicability, of what I will call secondary epistemic criteria to information on the Internet. Turning to this aspect will enable me to become somewhat more specific about the way in which the problem of misinformation through the Internet should be approached from a moral point of view.

4. Primary epistemic criteria

The exact character of the problematic status of misinformation through the Internet can be made more explicit by some reflection on criteria for assessing the reliability of information. What kinds of instruments do people have to measure the reliability of information? In judging the reliability of information, we can at least use four different types of criteria. I prefer to call these the four primary criteria of reliability. Berti and Graveleau labeled them neatly:[1]

- criteria relating to intrinsic quality;
- criteria relating to contextual quality;
- criteria relating to management and presentation;
- criteria relating to relative quality.

Criteria relating to intrinsic quality are, for instance, requirements of consistency, coherence, accuracy, and accordance with observations. Criteria of contextual quality are, e.g., completeness and accordance with the latest observations. Criteria of management and presentation have to do with the interpretability, accessibility, and security of the information. Criteria of relative quality are, for instance, the applicability for the user and the relationship to comparable sets of information *qua* intrinsic and contextual quality and quality of management and presentation.

Now, seekers of information themselves are often unable to assess the reliability of information in relation to the aforementioned primary criteria. They are generally no experts, and sometimes lack even the slightest knowledge of the topics about which they seek information. This applies equally to information published through the traditional media and to information published through new media such as the Internet. In order to judge whether one can trust the quality of information in the traditional media, most people seem to apply what I will call secondary epistemic criteria.

5. Secondary epistemic criteria

Secondary epistemic criteria are of a completely different kind. They have to do with the authority, trustworthiness, and credibility that are assigned to persons or organizations behind the information. Viewed rather superficially, this assignment of authority, trustworthiness and credibility may seem to happen on the basis of just the history of these persons or organizations, their reputation or the fact that others act as guarantors. On a deeper level, however, the application of secondary epistemic criteria appears to be based on an intricate complex of backgrounds of all kinds of manifest or latent recognition procedures for persons and organizations, traditions of reputations, and usage. Most of these are built in or embedded in conventions, social and institutional arrangements, and practices.

[1] **L. BERTI and D. GRAVELEAU, ADesigning and Filtering On-Line Information Quality: New Perspectives for Information Service Providers,@ in *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Ethical Issues of Information Technology, Ethicomp 98* (Rotterdam: EUR, 1998), pp. 79-88.**

People look for traces of the reliability of the information and of the information provider by gathering all kinds of indications about the background and the institutional setting of the source of information. People can find out, for example, whether the provider works at a university, what kind of university this is, whether it has a good reputation, whether it is recognized as one where people work according to commonly accepted methodological criteria, et cetera. Also, people seem to be attentive to the context in which the information is offered or made accessible, such as a university library, a reputed scientific journal, et cetera.

The very possibility of applying these kinds of secondary criteria is often lacking where the Internet is concerned. Often, the content provider is anonymous or has only a virtual identity. Generally, the influence of individuals in the process of providing information on the Internet is diminishing, whereas the influence of intelligent systems is growing. Also, the lack of traditional intermediaries (such as libraries, librarians, specialized publishers) may have a negative influence on the capabilities of information seekers to assess the reliability of information. These kinds of factors, i.e., the lack of information about content providers, the diminishing human influence in the provision of information, and the lack of traditional intermediaries, are responsible for the fact that an information seeker often lacks clues or any indication whatsoever about the character, background, and institutional setting of the content provider.

Adding to and further complicating the problem is the globalization that goes hand in hand with the Internet. Even when the recipient has some information about the content provider, he may not be able to assess the credibility of that provider. This is so, simply because often he will not be acquainted with backgrounds and institutional settings from all over the world, completely different societies, with completely different cultures. The recognition procedures and traditions that make up the institutional basis of the application of secondary epistemic criteria may be different in different cultures. A recipient from one culture may not recognize the procedures and traditions of the provider from another culture. It could even be that, if the recipient from one culture were able to recognize them, he or she would not accept them.

6. Solutions

Possible solutions to the problem of misinformation through the Internet, to my mind, are to be found in two strategies. These are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually supportive.

The first strategy is one of developing a critical attitude in recipients. People can be taught not to believe everything that is on the Internet, but to keep a certain intellectual distance to what they find on it. In addition, they can be taught and trained to keep an open eye for possible positive or negative indicators relating to primary and secondary epistemic criteria for reliability. As

far as secondary criteria are concerned, these indicators can be traditional ones, as are known from traditional media, or new ones. The latter, however, will have to be especially developed. This is the point where the first strategy meets the second.

The second strategy consists in enabling people to apply secondary epistemic criteria to the Internet. The ability to apply secondary epistemic criteria to the Internet requires three actions. First, in order to establish reliability there must be indicators of reliability, such as indications of the background or the organization from which the source of the information operates. Therefore, these indicators must be created or, in so far as they already exist, they must at least be pointed out, and made discernible for the recipient. Second, (an analogue of) the institutionally embedded credibility conferring backgrounds must be created, or, again, insofar as they are already present, they must be clearly pointed out. Regarding traditional media, these backgrounds consist of many different systems in many different forms, varying from different kinds of manifest or latent recognition procedures for persons and organizations to traditions of well-established reputations or just usage. Regarding the Internet, these backgrounds must, at least in part, be established anew. With respect to these freshly established backgrounds, then, third, at least some potential consensus or acceptance must be arrived at.

Creating new credibility-conferring systems that have the same function as the traditional, partially institutionally embedded, ones, and preparing the possibility of global consensus or acceptance thereof, are undoubtedly difficult tasks. Nevertheless, the situation looks all but hopeless. Probably, the best thing to do is to start scrutinizing the ways in which the traditional credibility-conferring systems work with regard to different kinds of information in different domains, to lay bare precisely the appropriateness and the inappropriateness of the application to information on the Internet, and then to find cures for the deficiencies. This may result in reparations of traditional systems or in fitting out partially or completely new ones.

Perhaps some of the already existing systems, with some adjustments, will appear to be of use for information on the Internet. Here, one may think, for instance, of the possibly successful institution of Trusted Third Parties in the form of the General Post Office, the notary public, or accountants. Also, the struggle over domain names shows that traditionally well-known and reputed trademarks are chosen as domain names with an eye to Abranding.@ This comes down to building on already existing consumers= trust and confidence in the well-known players in the physical world. In the Netherlands, for instance, where there is a long tradition of public radio and television broadcasting corporations with different religious, cultural, or political identities, some of these well-known corporations have started offering free Internet access. Clients have their entry through a portal where they can click ready-made bookmarks and links which the corporation has chosen and approved on the basis of the nature of their content. But, of course, completely different and more encompassing systems are conceivable. Here, one may think of large systems, building on certification, licensing, and accreditation.

7. Normative conflicts and responsibilities

Specifying and implementing the two strategies as such is already difficult. Additional complexities, however, arise from the obvious possibilities of normative conflicts between the realization of reliability-enhancing measures on the one hand, and normative principles regarding individual autonomy, the freedom to provide and to gather information, and privacy norms, on the other hand. For reasons of enhancing the reliability of information on the Internet one may, for instance, consider restricting the possibilities of dispersing information anonymously. Doing so, however, may be detrimental to privacy and to the freedom of speech. Something similar will be the case with teaching people and enabling them to take a critical distance from information on the Internet. The point where the empowerment of individuals turns into paternalistic meddling is all too easily attained.

Extremely problematic for the two strategies is the prevailing global moral pluralism. The Internet is a global medium *par excellence*. This means that the global moral pluralism is to be taken into account when credibility-conferring systems are designed or renovated. This is not only a matter of normative moral relativism, viz. the idea that different moral outlooks and varieties of moral viewpoints all have their own right of existence and ought to be tolerated and respected; it is, even more, a matter of effectiveness. Where systems clash with deeply felt convictions, they will not be accepted.

Of course, all of this does not mean that trying to establish reliability-enhancing measures must be abandoned, or even that conflicting norms must prevail on every occasion. The possibility of conflicts should make us careful and attentive to the constraints and deficiencies of reliability-enhancing measures. It invites us to assess meticulously the impact of each proposed system on the normative principles mentioned, and to balance the good of enhancing reliability against the possibly resulting moral loss.

Of course, it must be found out what parties can or should take up responsibility in further designing and implementing the strategies aiming to enhance the reliability of information on the Internet. Apart from individual users of the Internet themselves, candidates for taking up responsibilities are: content providers, access and service providers, governments, and private organizations. Questions of accountability should be posed from a practical, a technical, and a moral perspective. Although, once again, these are difficult questions, trying to find a fair distribution of responsibilities and tasks is not a hopeless undertaking from the onset.[2]

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[2] **A.H. VEDDER, ARethinking Moral Responsibility,@ in *Proceedings for Computer Ethics: Philosophical Enquiry 2000. Conference Proceedings*, ed. D. JOHNSON, J. MOOR, and H. TAVANI (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth, 2000), pp. 317-328. An extensively revised version will be published in *Ethics and Information Technology* (forthcoming spring 2001).**

8. Conclusions

In this chapter, I explored and specified the problems that are connected to misinformation through the Internet. I suggested that there are two strategies for coming to terms with these problems. One is to develop a critical attitude in the persons who use the Internet. The second consists in finding new secondary criteria that are suitable for the Internet or new ways of applying traditional secondary criteria. I also showed that implementing these strategies may conflict with normative principles regarding the freedom to provide and to receive information, with privacy norms and with normative moral relativism.

Further untangling and solving of the moral and epistemological problems relating to the quality of the information on the Internet may not only help to reduce misinformation. It may also provide us with deeper insights into the ways in which people normally judge the quality of the information, the different requirements regarding the reliability of information in different contexts and relative to different purposes, the ways in which people build up confidence and trust, and, finally, the role of the epistemic quality of information in moral decision-making. Thus, unraveling problems relating to the Internet opens up new perspectives. Challenges and possibilities of intellectual enrichment are awaiting us at the intersection of ethics and epistemology.